

1906

Crowds flock to Drury Lane to celebrate Ellen Terry's Jubilee



National Portrait Gallery

John Singer Sargent's portrait of Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth

1906: A special matinee in honour of Ellen Terry's fifty years on the stage was announced for December 12th at 2.30pm. The queue started at 8a.m. on December 11th - thirty hours before the performance. By midnight the queue contained over 500 people, and the scenes in Russell Street were unprecedented - seats, stools, blankets, sleeping bodies, street entertainers - and several hundred more people who had come simply to look at the queue. Ellen Terry herself appeared a midnight just to see the astonishing sight. At four o'clock in the morning the Drury Lane Theatre manager, Arthur Collins, arrived to survey the queue and immediately arranged for tea and coffee to be served at his expense to the waiting crowd. By nine o'clock the queue had swelled to over a thousand, with another thousand standing by to greet the arrival of the performers.

The doors to the theatre were opened at 10am and the performance began at 12.30. The first half consisted of a performance of "Trial by Jury", with the onstage jury-box and court room filled with every well known player and author in London. Foreign artists were represented by Monsieur Coquelin, Eleonora Duse and Enrico Caruso. After the interval Ellen Terry herself appeared as Beatrice in scenes from "Much Ado About Nothing" - and her supporting cast was made up of every available member of her own family. Finally Ellen Terry appeared as herself, surrounded by her family and, so it seemed, every famous actor in the country. She was greeted by enormous cheers. When they subsided she said: "Though I stand here as long as the Pyramids have stood there, I could never say what this day has been to me. I have the heart to wonder at all you have done for me, but not the tongue to praise you."

As soon as the curtain fell the entire audience rushed to the stage door, and thousands of people tried to shake Ellen Terry's hand as she left the theatre.

Henry Irving leaves a fortune

1906: Sir Henry Irving, who died last year, left the sum of £20,527. This enormous sum surprised many people who did not believe it was possible for anyone in the theatre profession to amass such a fortune.

Shaw's blistering attack on Amateurs

1906: The Amateur Players Association held a meeting to rally support for their claim that playwrights should charge a sliding scale of fees for amateur productions of their works. The fees should vary according to the size of the hall used for the amateur shows, and the fees should be waived when the performances are given for charity.

Author Bernard Shaw had been approached and asked to support the amateurs. There was cheering when it was announced that a letter from him had been received, but the cheers turned to boos when his letter was read out.

"I have a strong grudge against amateurs" he wrote, "because they habitually insult the art they dabble in. . . The charity of amateurs is hardly ever really charitable in its motive. It is a mere coat of whitewash for an indulgence which is regarded as questionable if not positively disreputable." He claimed that the money wasted on amateur dramatics would be better spent on creating professional theatres around the country. His letter continued: "What is to be said in defence of the stage-struck stupidity and ignorance that is content with a basket of soiled second-hand clothes and toy swords sent down by a London costumier, and hired out for a night at about treble the price the whole parcel of rubbish would sell for in Houndsditch? He announced he would not support the amateurs in their "nasty, vulgar, ignorant practices"

Variety Artists in "Federation"

1906: The Variety Artists Federation was officially formed on February 18th. This is a Union of music hall entertainers and has been created to represent the artists in negotiations with music hall proprietors and theatre managers. The main reason behind the formation of the Federation is the ongoing dispute inside the music halls concerning matinee performances. At present these are unpaid and considered part of the standard agreed salary.

The V.A.F. has adopted its own "anthem" - a song called "Federation Day" specially written by Harry Heath and Will Hyde. Variety artists are urged to sing their "anthem" at meetings and rallies to support the Trade Disputes Act which will shortly come before Parliament. The proposed new legislation is supported by many Liberal MPs, and since the Liberals have recently won a landslide victory at the General Election it is felt that further effort by variety and music hall performers will be worthwhile. Under the proposed new Act it will be possible for performers legally to withdraw their labour in the event of a "trade dispute".